

Chapter 10: Needs Assessment and Capacity Building

Introduction

Although a primary objective of the Integrated Regional Water Management Program is to bring funding to high-priority water resources projects within a region, the Inyo-Mono RWMG envisions a larger purpose. Throughout four years of conducting outreach in the Inyo-Mono region, we have come to realize that the resource needs of the region are not always financial. Many small water districts and DACs require resources in the form of time, technical expertise, or additional staff. The operating philosophy of the Inyo-Mono RWMG is that it is better to provide training on specific topics (grantwriting, CEQA, etc.) than to contract expensive consultants to do the work for us. Thus, another main objective of the Inyo-Mono IRWM Program is to assess the needs of stakeholders in the region and to bring resources to address those needs and to build capacity within stakeholder groups.

Needs Assessments

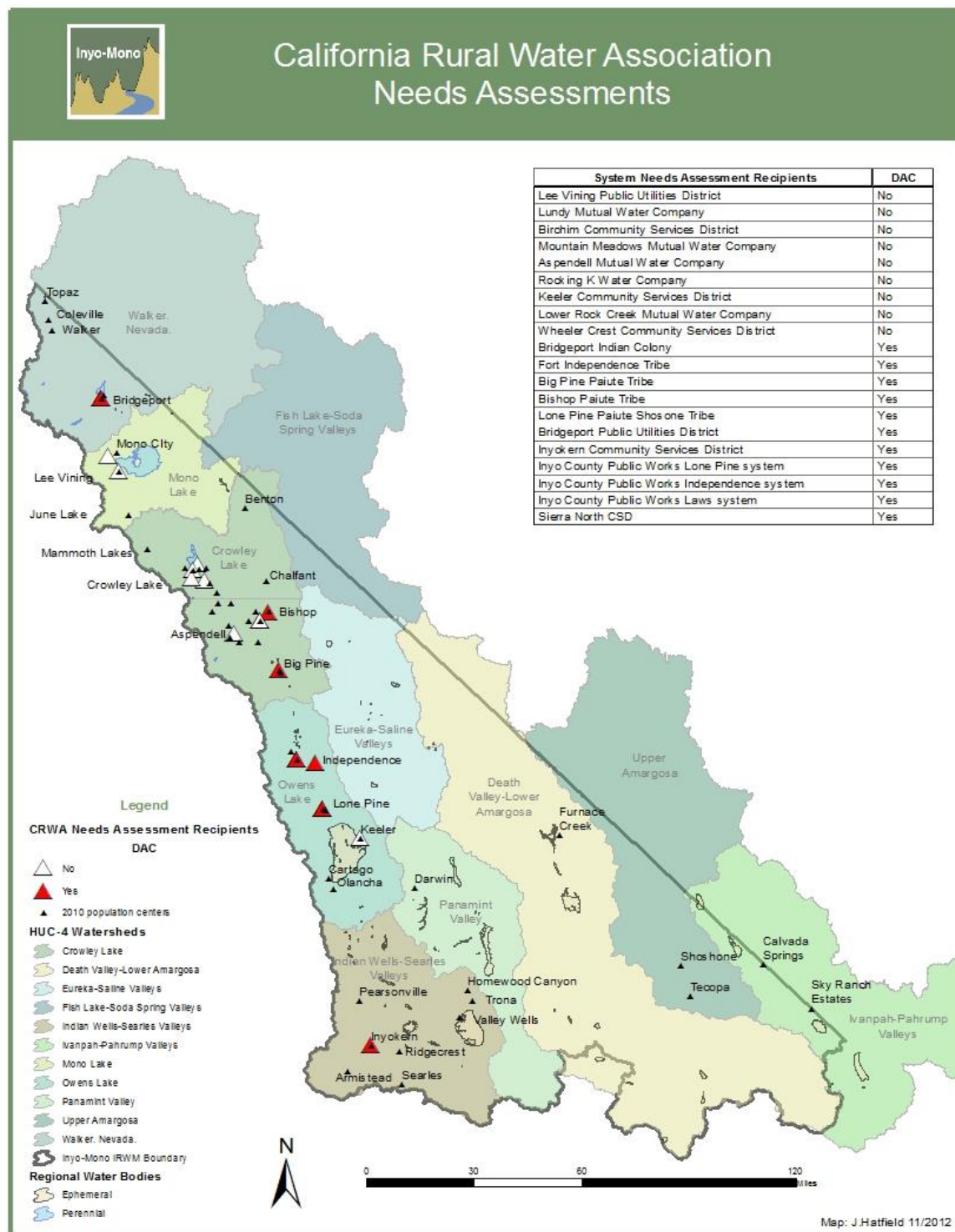
During preparation of the initial IRWM Plan, the group recognized that many of the small water systems and DACs of the region could benefit from independent evaluation and assistance toward improving operations. Early on, a relationship with the California Rural Water Association was forged. This organization is "dedicated to meeting the needs of water and wastewater systems by providing quality information, training and technical assistance in maintaining a high level of service to their communities" (California Rural Water Association, 2011). One of CRWA's services is to assess the needs of rural water systems with respect to each system's Technical, Managerial, and Financial (TMF) capacity for meeting applicable laws and regulations regarding drinking water and sustainability over the long term (California Rural Water Association, 2011).

During the autumn of 2011, the CRWA conducted needs assessments of 22 water systems in Inyo, Mono, and Kern Counties (Figure 10-1). These assessments were funded through a DWR Planning Grant and were conducted at 6 tribes, 10 public entities, and 6 private mutual water systems. Operators or board members of each system provided information to the CRWA representative, and they discussed the organizational capacity to provide safe drinking water and to comply with laws and regulations over the foreseeable future. These independent and standardized evaluations provided an opportunity to remind and/or educate each system operator about any outstanding needs for improving the TMF capacity of the system in a non-regulatory context.

A report that summarized problems identified in the needs assessments identified some common issues faced by small water systems in the Inyo-Mono Region (Reger, 2012). Five of the 22 systems had water quality issues because of either arsenic or uranium contamination in their water supply. Only one of these five is currently at the point where they are capable of moving to another source and therefore eliminating the concern. The other four still require additional funding or technical assistance to be able to address their contamination. As another

fundamental problem, three of the 22 systems had managerial difficulties with day-to-day operations and inadequate information about the system infrastructure (Reger, 2012).

Figure 10-1: Needs Assessments conducted within the Inyo-Mono region in 2011.



The map above shows recipients of CRWA Needs Assessments relative to the entities DAC status.

Aging infrastructure and an inability to replace and/or expand it in a timely manner were common problems in most of the systems. Very few systems had replaced any or all of their water mains and pipes in the last ten to twenty years, primarily because of anticipated high costs. Other needs identified by the study were installation of additional storage capacity for fire flow or other emergency situations and automated control of the system (Reger, 2012).

The compilation of technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) information gathered from each system showed a number of commonalities. Most water suppliers had operating plans, general and financial policies, ownership records, water rights, records of their current water capacity and usage, and emergency notification plans. Items that were commonly lacking were written operator instructions and job responsibilities, water conservation plans, five-year budgets, meters, and capital improvement plans (Reger, 2012)

Building Capacity

The results of the 22 needs assessments directly informed several subsequent RWMG efforts aimed at building capacity of stakeholder organizations in the region. These efforts mostly took the form of targeted workshops on a particular topic but also include the overall Inyo-Mono IRWM process.

Topical Workshops

A variety of training needs within the region became evident as the RWMG developed its organizational structure, assembled the initial IRWM Plan, and worked on the proposal for the first round of implementation funding.

Water Supplier Training by CRWA

The California Rural Water Association conducted three water-related workshops within the Inyo-Mono region during the autumn of 2011. Topics included Regulatory Review, Capital Improvements, and Water Shortage. In each of two workshops held in Mammoth Lakes and Bishop, 15 water system operators participated. A third workshop held in Independence benefitted another eight water systems. Water operators attending these workshops received six California Department of Public Health Water Contact Hours.

California Environmental Quality Act Compliance



During the process of preparing the proposal for the first round of implementation grants, many RWMG Members expressed a lack of knowledge about details of the state and federal environmental review laws (California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA] and National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA]). The RWMG attempted to build capacity among its Members and participants by organizing a series of workshops about CEQA. Although several participants in the Inyo-Mono RWMG are federal agencies (two

National Forests, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and federally-recognized tribes) or occasionally have projects in which they partner with a federal agency, a NEPA-specific workshop has yet to be developed for our region.

Four CEQA workshops were held during December of 2011 in Ridgecrest, Bishop, Mammoth Lakes, and Bridgeport. Three workshops provided an introduction to preparing CEQA documentation as a project proponent. These were titled "Water Resources and the California Environmental Quality Act" and were generously provided in-kind by the Law Firm of Chatten-Brown and Carstens of southern California. The fourth workshop was more general in scope and was organized from the perspective of reviewing and commenting on an environmental review. This workshop was conducted by the Planning and Conservation League of Sacramento and roughly followed their standard outline for such sessions. Details may be found at <http://www.pclfoundation.org/events/aboutceqaworkshops.html>.

Grant Writing Skills

An obvious disparity between a rural region such as the Inyo-Mono Region and many of the large urban or irrigation-district based RWMGs elsewhere in California is the lack of technical and managerial capacity to prepare thoroughly competent and competitive proposals for funding. RWMGs that include large urban water utilities and/or large well-funded irrigation districts have significant advantages with technical staff, consultants, and internal funding over rural RWMGs with respect to proposal development. There is a strong need to greatly improve the capacity of small rural water entities to prepare adequate proposals. Similarly, economically-disadvantaged communities and their water suppliers need significant help in improving their grant-writing capabilities to be better prepared to respond to the funding opportunities of the IRWM Program and others.

The Inyo-Mono RWMG took an initial step to build capacity for grant writing with a series of workshops offered in June, 2012. Three workshops were held – one each in Independence, Bishop, and Lee Vining. Each workshop covered the fundamentals of responding to requests for proposals. The sessions were interactive, and the participants informed their peers about many useful experiences. Although overall attendance was rather limited, the participants gave favorable reviews of the workshops and encouraged the RWMG to offer additional workshops. The Group plans to do so with funding from its Disadvantaged Communities grant.

Process-based Capacity Building

The IRWM planning process in the Inyo-Mono region has contributed to increased knowledge, abilities, contacts, referral resources, and funding opportunities -- often collectively called "building capacity" -- among the groups, agencies, and individuals participating in the RWMG. Capacity of Inyo-Mono RWMG Members and affiliates has been enhanced simply by participating in the routine meetings of the RWMG. The regular meetings as well as work on the Plan and various proposals have increased knowledge and understanding of technical and policy matters relating to water in the region and the state. Through collaboration within the RWMG, we have improved our understanding of local issues, problems, and solutions that our neighbors have employed. Through involvement with the IRWM planning process, we have improved our understanding of statewide priorities and program preferences and solutions

adopted by other regions. The creation, development, review, and revision of suitable projects for potential IRWM Program funding have certainly improved the ability of many RWMG participants to consider and craft quality proposals and projects.

The RWMG meetings have provided avenues for networking among attendees and secondary associates such as contractors, advisors, and colleagues who have been recommended by a RWMG attendee as a means of advising on or solving a particular problem. These contacts have greatly increased the flow of information among people involved in the full range of water resources activities within the Inyo-Mono Region. Such networking activity has also provided an opportunity for technical assistance between peers.

As an example of building capacity among IRWM regions, the Inyo-Mono RWMG continues to participate in interregional groups and events. A Sierra IRWMP Summit in October, 2009, and a Sierra Water Workgroup Summit in July, 2012, both sponsored by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and Sierra Nevada Alliance, provided excellent opportunities to learn from other IRWM groups in the Sierra Nevada. Both formal presentations and informal conversations allowed participants to exchange information, resources, and ideas with peer IRWM groups elsewhere in the Sierra Nevada. (See also Chapter 8, Coordination, for more information on interregional collaborations.)

Lastly, the Inyo-Mono RWMG website has been instrumental in local capacity building. Besides providing timely news about RWMG activities, meetings of other organizations, funding opportunities, and training possibilities, the website is an excellent resource and library for research papers, technical studies, maps, planning reports, and other useful documents concerning water in the region.